

MARGINALISATION OF DALITS IN INDIA

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received: 01 Oct 2018;

Received in revised form:
08 Oct 2018;

Accepted: 08 Oct 2018;

Published online: 10 Oct 2018.

Key words:

Marginalization,
Social Disadvantage,
Dalit,
Adivasi,
Tribal,
Social Spaces,
Inequality.

ABSTRACT

The term marginalization refers the social disadvantage and relegation to the fringe of society. The marginal man is one whom fate has condemned to live in two societies and in two, not merely different but antagonistic cultures, his mind is the crucible in which two different and refractory cultures may be said to melt and, either wholly or in part, fuses. Marginalization is a complex phenomenon in the present-day world and a critical concern of national and international communities. Its widespread occurrence is a consequence of several interrelated factors in socio-economic development which gain significance in the era globalization. In many Third World societies, people of the lower classes/castes [such as Dalit and Adivasi (tribal) communities in India] are pushed to the margins of society as a result of various historical and developmental factors. As mainstream development processes tended to create social spaces of inequality, Dalit and tribal communities face marginalization virtually in every sphere of social life. Insofar as the marginalized groups sustain a unique point of view shaped by their long-standing social position, the question of their 'Self Representation' has become relevant in social research. This paper states some recommendations regarding marginalization.

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INTRODUCTION

Marginalization is a complex and multi-layered concept. Nations can be marginalized at the global level, while classes and communities can be marginalized from the dominant social order within nations. Likewise, ethnic/caste/religious groups, families or individuals can be marginalized within localities. Marginalization is also a changing

Cite this article as: Ilavarasi, K., & Rajadurai, Benet. J., "Marginalisation of Dalits in India". *International Journal of Advanced Scientific Research & Development (IJASRD)*, 05 (09/I), 2018, pp. 28 – 33. <https://doi.org/10.26836/ijasrd/2018/v5/i9/50906>.

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phenomenon linked to many socio-economic factors and conditions. For instance, individuals or groups/communities might enjoy high social status at one point in time, but as social change takes place, so they would lose this status and become marginalized. Similarly, as life cycle stages change, so might people's marginalized position.

Charles worth, while analyzing the working class life in a town in England, says that it is the economic changes and the social conditions they ushered in that have consigned the people to a life of marginality which, naturally enough, manifests itself in their social status, manner and style. Peter Leonard defines social marginality as “being outside the mainstream of productive activity and/or social reproductive activity.”

Leonard characterizes these people as remaining outside “the major arena of capitalist productive and reproductive activity” and as such experiencing “involuntary social marginality”. The experience of marginality can also arise in a number of ways. For some people, those severely impaired from birth, or those born into particularly marginal groupings, this marginality is typically life-long and greatly determines their lived experience. For others, marginality is acquired by later disablement or by changes in the social and economic system.

1.1 Marginalization and Identity Politics

Marginalization is related to the social conditions emerging from the status of specific castes or classes. Members of these castes or classes are born into a situation of inferior status and are, therefore, in danger of being marginalized. The caste system of India is an example, while in many other countries, ethnic identity, education, living standards, etc are being perceived as the criteria of exclusion.

The degree and seriousness of the exclusion varies from country to country. It would be pertinent in this context to consider the realities of gender inequality, arising from deeply entrenched attitudes among males that the female gender is the inferior gender and are pushing women into many marginal situations. In the past, marginalization has generally been discussed in the context of Immigrant status or the minority status of racial, ethnic or religious minority. Marginalization is a major problem adversely affecting every aspect of the quality of life creating divisions between people. It can fragment or polarize communities in such a way that social integration is threatened and the potential for building mutually supportive communities minimized.

The outcome of it can also be deleterious. If the marginalization results in violence, it seriously undermines much of the development. It is a situation in which human rights of people are not sufficiently respected and the principles of equity and equality are flouted. The society is fragmented and many might suffer from the insecurity and poverty which is almost invariably identified with a situation of marginalization. Eventually, marginalization assumes international dimensions with positive and negative elements. This may take the form of international solidarity among marginalized groups such as the world movement of indigenous peoples. Marginalization can also cause a stream of migrants moving to some other country with adverse effects on inter-state relations.

1.2 Identity Politics

Identity politics is understood as a new kind of politics that has emerged in the democratic life of the present-day world. It is generally associated with a host of

movements, group cultural communities that are committed to the practice of identity-based political articulation and mobilization. Though these groupings occupy an ambivalent role within democratic politics and society, their influence and impact appear to be growing. Theorists of many views see identity politics (or politics of identity) as indicative of a qualitative alteration to the character and culture of democratic states. It reflects a shift away from political alignments driven by individual interest or ideological debates towards a culture in which citizen's cluster under the banner of an encompassing group with its own collective personality and distinctive culture.

1.3 Collective Identity and New Social Movements

Collective identity represents a very significant part in relation to the NSMs and identity politics. It is the shared definition of a group that derives from its member's common interests and solidarity. Collective identities people deploy in protest against embedded identities that inform people's routine social life and detached identities that invoke associational membership, nationalities and other self-defining experiences. Many scholars try to theoretically account for the appeals to identity in the new movements in relation to individual or group autonomy or particularity.

The NSMs embody the efforts for identity building vis-à-vis the political institutions. They are movements for a new democracy. Their self-limiting concept of emancipation allows these movements to offer the concept of the "democracy of everyday life" and perceive democracy as the condition for recognition, autonomy, and self-affirmation. The NSMs characterize primarily as identity claims and their actor's assertion of their particularity against pre-constituted universal identities (e.g. nation or class), as well as their demand for universal social recognition and political inclusion. Sociologists have also been attracted to collective identity as a response to gaps in dominant resource mobilization and political process models.

1.4 Marginalization and Identity Politics in India

The identity politics in India has many dimensions distinguished by different situations of consciousness existing in the society. K. N. Panikkar categorizes them into two: "the politics of domination and the politics of resistance." The main aim of the first is the "quest for power for which identity is invoked as a means of mobilization." The second is "the politics of rights in which identity serves as a cohesive force for achieving internal solidarity." According to Panikkar, "the identity politics of the majority religion belongs to the former, whereas the identity politics of minorities, such as Dalits and Adivasis, to the latter". Panikkar says that the identity politics of marginalized groups is entrenched in opposition and resistance. "Their marginality defines their identity, and the aim of the politics emerging out of it is more often aimed at inclusion and equality."

1.5 Dalits: The Concept

Dalit is a self-designation for a group of people traditionally regarded as lower class. They are a mixed population of numerous caste groups all over South Asia and speak various languages (Geetanjali, 2011). Traditionally, there are four principal castes⁴ (divided into many sub-categories) and one category of people who fall outside the caste system – the dalits. The word dalit – literally translating to 'oppressed' or broken, is generally used to

refer to people who were once known as ‘untouchables’⁶, those belonging to castes outside the fourfold Hindu Varna system. They are Antyaja, i.e., outside the Varna system. The Dalits are called by various other names also: Dasyu, Dasa, Atisudra, Panchama, Tirukulattar, Adikarnataka, Adi Dravida, Schedule Caste (SC) etc. but Ambedkar termed them as “Depressed Class”. Within the dalit community, there are many divisions into sub-castes.

Dalits are divided into leather workers, street sweepers, cobblers, agricultural workers, and manual "scavengers". The ultimate measure of a man (or a woman) is not where he (or she) stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he (or she) stands at times of challenge and controversy.” – Martin Luther King Jr. See, kamala karduvvuru’s Blog. In India there are more than 6,000 castes, each ranked hierarchically according to graded inequality and the hierarchy is based on the notion of purity and pollution. A broad view is that the word ‘dalit’ is not pertaining to any caste; it includes the poor, exploited, and workers of all castes; and who are unable to work upright in the society are regarded as dalits. Prof. Aravinda Malagatti defines: “The people who are economically, socially and politically exploited from centuries, unable to live in the society of human beings have been living outside the village depending on lower level of occupation, and unable to spell out their names, lived as ‘untouchables’ are regarded as dalits”. The journey to present dalit identity has travelled a long road from being identified as ‘untouchable’, ‘unseeable’, ‘unapproachable’, ‘black castes’, ‘ati-sudra’, ‘Harijan’ (= children of God), ‘depressed caste’, ‘adivasi’ (= indigenous people) and ‘Scheduled Caste’. None of these has brought about a real change of meaning, since dalits continue to be tied to the notion that at the end of the day, we are ‘different’, ‘segregated’ and ‘excluded’.

1.6 Dalits: Oppression and Exclusion

Dalits have been oppressed as well as culturally subjugated, and politically marginalized. The principles of untouchability and “purity and pollution” dictum tell what dalits are and are not allowed to do; where they are and are not allowed to live, go, or sit; who they can and cannot give water to, eat with, or marry; extending even into the minute aspects of daily life. Participation or its absence is always an issue. Marginalization of dalits in economic policies and sectors is sometimes visible and sometimes invisible, yet deplorable. For Marginalization, (n) refers to the social process of becoming or being made marginal (especially as a group within the larger society); “the marginalization of the underclass” instance, in ever-growing dalit literature, issues regarding marginalization and invisibility of women’s contribution to economy and its growth remain under highlighted. This is despite the attention paid to women’s studies right from 70s in general. This clearly shows how most women’s studies have ignored caste dynamics

Discrimination for dalits does not end if they convert from Hinduism to another religion. In India, Islam, Sikhism, and Christianity (among other religions) maintain some form of caste despite the fact that this contradicts their religious precepts. As a result, dominant castes maintain leadership positions while dalit members of these religions are often marginalized and flagrantly discriminated against. For example, in some places dalit Christians are provided separate burial areas from non-dalit Christians. Budgets of the government are powerful tools to address economic issues through provision of public goods

for dalits. Incorporating all the elements – economic, social, cultural and political there has emerged what may be termed as ‘dalit movement’.

1.7 Dalit Movement

The Dalit movement, in the familiar sense of organized resistance of the ex-untouchables to caste oppression, may not be traced beyond colonial times. However, in a wider sense of the struggle of lower castes against the hegemony of Brahminical ideology, it has had to coexist with the history of caste itself. In another sense, it could be taken as the articulation phase of the numerous faceless struggles against the iniquitous socio-economic formation ordained by the caste system that has occupied vast spaces of Indian history.

The modern dalit movement began with mass movements – localized, grassroots level endeavors – somewhat simultaneous, conversion movements, where dalits became Christians, or Muslims or Sikhs. The movements are confusing largely because of public controversy regarding them. “All human beings are born equal in dignity and rights” as stated in the Article 1 of the Declaration of Human Rights, General Assembly of the UNO (Sharma, 2002). While this ‘equality’ is one that meant to securing simple ‘social justice’ – a concept that has fascinated philosophers ever since Plato – it is also stated proactively as the promotion of equality through comprehensive government action. Therefore, put in terms of action dalit movement is assertion of rights. That exactly is what Ambedkar and his Team did for the country through its Constitution.

1.8 Transformation for Inclusion

Identity within the caste system as both ‘touchable and untouchable’ or ‘high and low’ survives because it continues to provide meaning under the present system. Discovering the meaninglessness of the caste system is therefore the first major step towards transformation. Transformation therefore is not to choose between a ‘touchable’ and ‘untouchable’ identity, but it is to do way with both. This can be done only with the conviction that both constructs are anti-human. The choice however, is never easy as relationships are based on the structure (caste) that is traditional but formed for new purposes. Caste continues to govern rates of modernization and access to new opportunities. Again ‘modernity’ is relative, moving between thresholds of change and always having the inevitable forces of conflict. So the forces may make or mar ‘mobility’ and ‘participation’. The search for an identity that gives a meaning to make life worth living is a constant search, especially for Dalits because of their suffering. ‘Touchable’ minds are less motivated to do away with their inhuman identity because they fear that their world – one based on hypocrisy- will – will collapse. Transformation therefore, has to be a journey towards self-respect and value that can influence other minds to follow and gravitate towards it. ‘Dalit’ – as understood and internalized as a moral position of people who believe in ‘equality’ – is the giant step towards transformation.

Dalits therefore, are those who believe that all human beings are equal; dalits are those who practice equality in their lives with all; and dalits are those who fight inequality wherever it is seen in practice. To summarize, given the fact that ‘caste’ as a system is an economic, social, political, cultural and psychological order, there has to be a multi-dimensional approach including strategies that involve using law, mass mobilization,

awareness of rights, globalization of human rights, land reforms, affirmative action programs, education, women's leadership and reinventing spiritual discourse.

CONCLUSION

The problems of dalit children in India reveal that the students from these communities have been facing discrimination: social exclusion of various #inds, despite the fact that such forms of discrimination are forbidden in the citizenship. Since education is a potential instrument of man and social engineering, he concentrated on an education that could draw out the best in the child body, mind and spirit for developing a peace loving human personality. It can transform the destiny of man and is capable of establishing an alternative social order if it is practiced sincerely and honestly in its true perspective. On the one hand, it abolishes the practice of untouchability, and on the other hand, it introduces the positive discrimination measures to achieve integration of dalit communities into the mainstream society

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